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Lesotho: A Foundation Will Pave the Way for the Future

“Don't tell us about dreams – dream dinners aren't any good and we can't share them.” (“J.R.R. Tolkien Quotes”) Lesotho is a country filled with dreams of better days and better meals- dreams of food security. The beautiful Kingdom in the Sky is wracked with hunger and destitution. Significant issues for food insecurity in Lesotho are HIV/AIDs, erosion, and erratic weather patterns. However, a foundation built by addressing core problems will enable solutions elsewhere. Creating access to land and credit, as well as closing gender and cultural gaps in Lesotho will allow great strides to be made in more efficient agricultural practices and HIV/AIDs healthcare. After all, as Norman Borlaug stated, “The destiny of world civilization depends upon providing a decent standard of living for all mankind.” (“Norman Borlaug - Acceptance Speech”) Without laying down the foundation, there's nothing to build upon.

The Kingdom of Lesotho is a land debilitated by poverty and hunger, and an unemployment rate of 45% (Africa: Lesotho). This is mainly due to the lack of arable land-- Lesotho is slightly smaller than the state of Maryland and is largely covered with mountains. Most people live in rural areas, attempting to make a living, but because of diminished food production, the country is required to import 60-70% of its food (FAO Initiative on Soaring Food Prices). The great majority of Lesotho families live on subsistence farming and have many children (Lesotho: AIDs Orphan Care). Most likely, these children live with one or both parents infected or killed by HIV/AIDs. Lesotho has the third highest prevalence of HIV/AIDs in the world; almost one in four adults is infected by the disease (Africa: Lesotho). This has resulted in the loss of many adult providers and has left countless children orphans. Another challenge that smallholder farmers face every day is extreme erosion. The United Nations estimates that by 2040 there will be no farmable soil left in Lesotho if the present erosion rates continue (“Soil Erosion in Lesotho”). This increasing land devastation has forced many family providers, adult and child, to become herders or find mining work in South Africa.

Despite widespread poverty and hunger in Lesotho, literacy rates are among the highest in Africa (Africa: Lesotho). The Free Primary Education Policy in Lesotho provides equal access to primary education for both boys and girls. It also aims to discourage gender disparities in Lesotho, which have more than evened out as far as education is concerned. The male literacy rate is 74.5% and the female literacy rate is significantly higher, 94.5% (“Africa: Lesotho”). Unfortunately this is largely due to the fact that many boys are obliged to drop out of school to provide an income for their families. Despite this seeming upward surge in closing the gender gap, there are many other factors to consider, such as household control, pay, health, and overall status (Jayal and Varley).

In Lesotho farmers grow a variety of crops and animals. The majority of vegetation grown is corn, but wheat and sorghum are also important. Herders primarily raise cattle, ponies, sheep, and goats. Herding practices graze animals on communal grounds, roaming across the kingdom for seven months at a time (“LESOTHO”). Because of the large numbers of men working in South Africa and as herders, women make up over 60% of the agricultural workforce in Lesotho (“FAO Initiative on Soaring Food Prices”). However, because of recent weather patterns that resulted in heavy rain and long droughts, and other issues, agricultural production has fallen severely. In 2011, the corn production was one-third less than the previous five-year average and two times more people are in need of support than there were last year (“Food Security Information for Decision Making”).

A lack of access to land and credit, as well as major gender and cultural discrimination are four key factors that stand in the way of food security in Lesotho. On top of owning little arable land, the process

for land use in Lesotho is very informal. According to tradition, land ownership has the ability to change each year (“LESOTHO”). This makes it difficult and gives no incentive for farmers to take care of the land, so poor farming practices ensue and doesn’t allow for the buying or selling of land. In addition, land acts created to solve these problems are rarely trusted or implemented because of the large cultural gap present. This also makes it difficult to execute new women’s rights laws. At almost two-thirds of the farming workforce in Lesotho (“Lesotho: Full Country Report”), women are an integral part of the agricultural process. However, women lack the education and ability to maximize food production because of the accepted and incorrect opinion that women are not the primary providers (Jayal and Varley). Underlying everything is the inability to purchase necessary seed and equipment to improve farming practices (“FAO Initiative on Soaring Food Prices”). Access to credit in Lesotho for households is at best inadequate and at worst very difficult to obtain (Coppock). Because Lesotho is producing less food, the cost of inputs has soared, making seed a precious investment that few can afford. By securing property rights and access to credit for the poor in addition to closing the evident gender and culture gap, food security in Lesotho will become more attainable.

In Lesotho there’s never enough land, money, and consequently, food, to go around. The vast majority of land, 89%, is non-arable, mountainous terrain (“Africa: Lesotho”). “If we had more land we could produce more,” stated Sechaba, a citizen of Lesotho who lives in poverty (“In Pictures: Lesotho’s Land Poverty”). Lesotho has a long history of land acts that attempt to increase agricultural production. Traditionally, Lesotho is a kingdom, and the land belongs constitutionally to King Letsie III, to be shared communally by the Basotho males (“Pastoralists Fear Land Act”). Each year, local chiefs decide whom the land should belong to for another season. While this tradition ensures that no one is homeless, it is incredibly inefficient. Students at St. Rodrigue School in Lesotho stated that no one is homeless in rural Lesotho, because the chief will give them land (Jayal and Varley).

However, the chief retains the authority to withdraw the land at any time. The 1979 land act strove to secure tenure for landholders. In the past, chiefs had been allowed to reallocate land upon death of a landowner or in order to accommodate new households, reallocation would now only be allowed in the case of abuse or non-use of the land (“Lesotho: Full Country Report”). This is a fine proposal, because it gives an incentive to use the land given and treat it well. However, it is very difficult to implement laws in the rural areas of Lesotho. Land has always been a sensitive issue in Lesotho and changes are not readily accepted (Johnson and Motlotlo).

One of the reasons it is so difficult for the people to trust land acts like this is that they feel a separation between themselves and those who wrote it. “This land act is not for us, it is for people sitting in the highest seats of government and in the fancy chairs in the city,” said Khotso Lehloka, secretary general of the Lesotho Herders Association (“Pastoralists Fear Land Act”). In 2010, a land act was introduced to attempt a “modernization” of land distribution. This land act would not only give tenure, but also include a “formal lease-based tenure system”, unlike the previous land acts (“Pastoralists Fear Land Act”). This would allow for the buying and selling of land. It would allow investors to come in, and receive insurance and mortgages. This is what is required for Lesotho to have a modern economy.

The problem is that no one knows about it. “The government didn’t do enough to talk to people when they were debating and signing the Land Act. People simply weren’t made aware of the Act and what its impact will be, so we feel the government may use these laws to hurt or take advantage of the very poor or marginalized,” stated Lehloka, representative of 17,000 to 20,000 Basotho herders (“Pastoralists Fear Land Act”). In order to improve stability and efficiency of access to land in Lesotho, it’s imperative to inform and educate farmers about land acts and their basis, as well as conduct greater research with input from the people whom will be impacted by it- subsistence farmers in rural Lesotho.

The cultural differences in Lesotho are not between ethnic groups: 99.7% of the population is Basotho (“Lesotho”). Instead, it is between those who have food and those who don’t. Two Grinnell Corps teaching fellows in St. Rodrigue, an all-girls school in Lesotho, discussed the evident differences between the rural village they live in and the capital of Lesotho: Maseru. They stated that there is a “political class” that dominates in Maseru. The majority of people living in Maseru are well off, and those who aren’t have a better life than smallholder farmers in St. Rodrigue. Poor urban dwellers have more reliable access to water, electricity, and a more dependable source of income. The girls of St. Rodrigue have never seen a light bulb. It is no wonder the herders, the farmers, the poverty-stricken feel a separation.

This is only aggravated by the history of high corruption levels in the Lesotho government. In September of 2002, Acres International was found guilty of passing a \$260,000 bribe to the chief executive of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, Masupha Sole. Three months prior, the executive was found guilty of 13 counts of accepting bribes and being paid \$2,000,000 (“Corruption in Lesotho”). The Directorate on Corruption and Economic Offences (DCEO) was established a decade ago to investigate corruption in the government. However, the government funding for the DCEO is less than adequate, causing anti-corruption investigations to grind to a halt (“Political Will Crucial”). The farmers and herders of rural Lesotho just don’t trust and even resent their government (Jayal and Varley). As a result of the strong cultural tension, it is difficult at best to implement new laws designed to improve food security, such as the 2010 Land Act. There is not much that can be done to improve this, besides access to food for all. However, more education on both ends of the spectrum would reduce the feeling of division.

Access to food is determined by many things, but it is impossible to plant seed if there isn’t any. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) stated that one of the main reasons food imports have risen so high is that farmers cannot afford to buy high quality inputs. The price of corn rose 10% from 2010 to 2011 and the price of oil and paraffin rose as much as 25% (“Weather Extremes Threaten Food Security”). The banking system in Lesotho is small, shallow, and dominated by foreign banks. The system is solid, but access to credit for households is considerably limited (Coppock).

A major aid in creating credit access in Lesotho would be micro financing. Micro financing is designed for low-income individuals or groups with little capital and no access to a bank. It allows borrowers to take smaller loans and pay back over an extended amount of time (“About Microfinance”). It is designed to help small business owners and subsistence farmers expand and save without a lot of initial capital. Microfinance was originally established with groups of women who would hold each other responsible for paying back the loan. This trend of women empowerment in micro financing continues today. Microfinance institutions support women’s economic participation, promoting gender equity in the marketplace and the household (“About Microfinance”). As Dr. Yunus, a pioneer in micro financing said, “Credit is a human right that should be treated as a human right. If credit can be accepted as a human right, then all other human rights will be easier to establish.”

On the other hand, a recent study found that micro financing is much more complex than Dr. Yunus once thought. David Roodman, author of the new book Due Diligence and a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development in Washington, assessed that micro financing hardly improves the situations of people living in poverty-- and may even make it worse. Roodman has found that the repayment pressure on borrowers has resulted in them taking loans from equally poor neighbors or doing without necessities rather than default on the loan. He argues that a problem with micro financing is that it has grown too big, too fast. He gives the impression that micro financing institutions (MFI) are giving money to borrowers carelessly without researching the background and probability that the loan can be repaid (“Microfinancing”). However, both Roodman and MFIs like the World Bank, the Grameen Bank and Kiva agree that poor people can save; they just need a place to do it. The majority of the people in Lesotho live on less than a dollar a day (“Rural Poverty in Lesotho”). They can’t afford to start a savings account with an opening balance of \$1,000. Both the World Bank and the Grameen Bank are currently operating in Lesotho, but many households remain with no access to credit.

However, there may be another solution. In Kenya, the Mobile-Pesa (M-Pesa) system appears to be doing wonders. M-Pesa allows mobile money transfer for those without a bank account easily and quickly. In Kenya, over 50% of the adult population uses M-Pesa to send and receive money, to pay for shopping, or for utility bills. After registering at an M-Pesa outlet and loading money onto the phone, users can send the money to a third party using a text message. “I don’t need to go to the bank when I have the bank in my phone,” says John Makusi Simiyu, a businessman in Kenya (Graham). Traveling in the Mountain Kingdom of Lesotho is not only difficult, it is an ordeal. A system similar to M-Pesa in Lesotho would allow households to borrow and lend money without banks.

Easier access to credit, either through M-Pesa or microfinancing could dramatically change the lives of women. While the gender gap in Lesotho is rapidly closing, to declare equality now would be preposterous. According to the FAO, women make up 60% of the agricultural workforce in Lesotho. Despite this and new acts to bridge the gender gap, women remain for the most part dependent on men (Allen). New rights are now available to women because of the Legal Capacity of Married Persons Act, such as the right to buy property and buy medical insurance without permission.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to make women aware of such changes, and even harder to enforce them. Gayatri Jayal teaches a guidance and counseling class at the all-girls school in St. Rodrigue. One day they had a discussion on whether men are stronger and more capable of employment. The girls responded with confusion, men had more muscles so they “must be the better sex,” some said. Those who disagreed or questioned the thought were regarded with suspicion (Jayal). It is no wonder young girls in Lesotho think this way. A large number of households in Lesotho are headed by women- 27.6%, and women are largely responsible for agricultural activities on subsistence farms.

Despite this, men, fathers and husbands, have control of the land, income, and situation. Regardless of any laws made in Maseru, customary norms, religious beliefs, and social practices determine gender equality in rural Lesotho. General Law states that if a woman is unmarried at 21 or a widow of any age she is a legal major. However customary law dictates that until marriage a woman is under the guardianship of her father, whereupon it is transferred to her husband. Upon his death, it is shifted to the heir. Customary law also allows polygamous marriage, “lobola”, or bride price, and it forbids a woman to divorce unless it is proven that she is a witch (“Full Country Report”). Most importantly, land allocation depends upon customary laws, instead of abiding by the Land Acts of 1979 and 2010, meaning that women’s land rights are not assured.

The Global Gender Gap Report 2011 ranked Lesotho as 9th best in the country for closing the gender gap, above countries such as the United States, the Netherlands and Switzerland (Hausmann). While literacy and school enrollment rates are significantly higher for females, this can be very misleading. After taking pay, health, and overall status into account, the gender gap is far from equal. 57% of adults in Lesotho living with HIV/AIDs are women (Kates). For 2011 it was estimated that a woman in Lesotho earns \$0.74 for every dollar a man makes (Hausmann).

While women tend to be getting a better education, it does little for them in the long run. There are not many jobs available for women, mainly teaching positions. Furthermore, if a man and woman with the same education are up for the same job, the man will secure the position (Varley). The feeling that women are inferior and unimportant is both evident in Lesotho and completely untrue. The Minister of Education stated that it was a “waste of resources” to teach agriculture to young girls because “farming is male” (Jayal). This could not be further from the truth. The reality that most Lesotho farmers are women needs to be accepted and taken seriously. With greater resources and agricultural education, women could improve subsistence farms and operations.

FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf stated, “Gender equality is not just a lofty ideal, it is also crucial for agricultural development and food security. We must promote gender equality and empower women in

agriculture to win, sustainably, the fight against hunger and extreme poverty.” (“Closing the Gender Gap in Agriculture”) This is especially true in Lesotho, a country where the majority of agricultural work is done by women. More opportunities for women such as scholarships and promising jobs would empower and enable women to make the best choices and to feel “fully people” (Jayal and Varley). It is imperative that actions be taken to improve the standing of women in Lesotho if food security is to move forward.

The food security issue in Lesotho is caused mainly by the absence of access to land and credit, as well as the major cultural and gender differences. These four factors, if improved, would work together and build off each other to create a stronger economy and country. By decreasing the cultural gap between the elite and the poverty-stricken, as well as reducing corruption in the government, Land Acts and women’s rights laws would be easier to implement because herders and farmers of subsistence farms would trust instead of resent the lawmakers in Maseru. This in turn will increase agricultural productivity with more efficient land use and a move toward a modern economy, which will also aid in closing the cultural gap. Implementation and education of women’s rights will improve pay, land rights and overall status, which will then affect the agricultural output as women are the majority of farmers in Lesotho. Improved access to credit, either through micro financing or a mobile banking system, will allow farmers, herders, and entrepreneurs to develop farms and small businesses. By making progress in each of these four sections, Lesotho will develop a cycle of greater class and gender equality and more access to land and credit.

Three-quarters of Lesotho’s population makes a living off of agriculture, yet only 8.4% of the GDP comes from agriculture (“Africa: Lesotho”). Farming practices are extremely inefficient; HIV/AIDs prevalence in Lesotho is ranked third in the world (“Africa: Lesotho”), and in Lesotho, more than one in every ten children will die before their fifth birthday from malnutrition and HIV/AIDs infection (“MDGs in Lesotho”). These are bleak statistics, and to tackle them there must be an establishment of gender and economic equality, as well as secure access to credit and property rights. These four factors work together and build off each other to create a stronger country. In order to increase efficiency in farm production and practices, it is necessary to secure property rights and access to credit. It is imperative that the gender and cultural gaps are driven shut to improve agricultural processes and efficient land use. If the foundation is set in position, the rest will fall into place.

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